

THEORY OF MISERY, MISERY OF THEORY

A Report on the New Conditions of Revolutionary Theory

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*“Better to be a debtor than to pay with coin
that does not bear our image!”*

—Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

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The organized theoretical effort (the most advanced since Marx) carried out by the members of the Situationist International has not only burned itself out, it seems content to accept a place among the curiosities in the museum of revolutionary history. Rather than trying to get back on its feet, this fallen theoretical dragon prefers to pride itself on the still-impressive reverberations from its past exploits — exploits that are becoming distant enough to take on a comfortably legendary character.

The misadventures of the situationists’ theory and those to which comparable movements of revolutionary intellectuals in the past succumbed are finally reunited in the very nature of their failures. Just as with Marxist thought and other later efforts to develop a revolutionary critique, all the achievements of the real situationist theoretico-practical effort ended up undergoing a total *inversion* of their meaning. They now constitute nothing more than one particular form of cultural verbiage within the general pseudocommunication

imposed by existing conditions, a pseudocommunication that is as prevalent among those who revolt against those conditions as among those who accept them.

The real situationist spirit, the spirit that (to those capable of grasping undertakings of this order) was so clearly at the origin of the situationist adventure, no longer has any choice but to turn without mercy against the edifice of its own *petrified* theory, against its entire past and its former values, or else be swept from the revolutionary battlefield as a source of useless and antiquated verbosity.

From now on no new development of revolutionary thought will be possible unless the situationist *critical power* is applied not only to the old SI organization but to situationist theory itself. The project of developing a theory of combat that contains its own critique must be taken up again from scratch.

To accomplish this, the situationists' theory must no longer be judged on the terrain where it *wants* to be judged, namely on its theoretical *intentions*, its scientific validity, its program, etc. To hesitate to go beyond this terrain and make a more vital critique — whether out of some unwarranted concern for intellectual objectivity or out of respect, because so far no one else has done any better (1917 Russia didn't come up with any theory better than Lenin's) — would *at best* amount to assuming the drawbacks of a disembodied orthodoxy à la Korsch or the sort of illusion characteristic of Lukács. If the situationists' theory still *directly* interests the revolutionary movement, it is as an object-lesson of what such a theory could *become*: one more ideology of revolution, one more system of representation expressing something other than what it intends and serving ends other than its explicit ends.

The situationists' theory made itself known as the *revolutionary theory of dissatisfaction*. It found itself at the converging point of all the lines of force that are transforming the conditions of existence — and consequently of *struggle* — in contemporary society, both because it was made possible by those conditions and because it was capable of expressing them. As a critique of a particular *stage* of a commodity society that was far from having

concretely developed all its material consequences (including the revolutionary opposition to itself), the situationists' theory ran the risk of becoming the expression of *all* the dissatisfaction released in this process; that is, not only of the *profound* dissatisfaction linked to the proletarianization of all sectors of social existence — dissatisfaction that has become really *revolutionary* — but also of that far more widespread *superficial dissatisfaction* stemming from particular features of the present stage as well as from the ever-increasing frustrations of old habits and tastes. The situationists' theory was not in a position to see well enough the danger contained precisely in the *spectacular logic* of the conditions it combated, which led it to be understood, and ultimately to understand itself, according to the logic of *illusion*, and thus to be assimilated by the existing order as a *cultural code of integrated dissatisfaction*.

The hierarchized consumption of economic goods, of phony relations among individuals, and of phony objects of struggle which the spectacle of modern dissatisfaction now provides in superabundance has as its immediate subjective counterpart this form of superficial dissatisfaction, which in fact constitutes the only real *subjective basis* upon which the present social system can function.

When this superficial dissatisfaction feels obliged to express itself in "situationist language," the optical illusions and confusions it creates stem from the very nature of existing conflicts. The revolutionary goal of establishing the socio-historic conditions of "enjoyment without restraint" intersects with the ordinary publicity of enjoyment within the economy (ranging from glorification of current conditions to fantasies of bureaucratic-ecological reforms), sometimes to the point that the expressions of the two are confused with each other. This apparent resemblance comes from the fact that they reflect the same historical conflict, though seen from opposite sides of the barricade. But even though they sometimes appear very close, superficial dissatisfaction is qualitatively as far removed from revolutionary dissatisfaction as are the resigned victims of existing conditions. The spread of superficial dissatisfaction — the generally assumed standpoint that henceforth dominates the perception and all the representations of contemporary social life — simply expresses the fact that things have become so unsatisfactory that no one can be *quietly resigned* anymore; even resignation has had to adopt the pose and language of dissatisfaction.

It is not surprising that the revolutionary theory that reintroduced the *dialectical method of the totality* into the struggle (in order to put the comprehension of the social question on better bases) was able, even while remaining fundamentally uncomprehended, to strike such a sympathetic chord

in these social conditions where the economy dominates human life in a *totalitarian* manner. This modern aspect of the notion of totality has become familiar to everyone, if only because everyone has been conditioned to it through the rules of hierarchized consumption: if each level of hierarchized consumption and power can do nothing but covet the next higher level, this is because hierarchical organization presents the *totality* of economic benefits and social powers to people's covetous desires.

The *totality* effectively serves as the new universal standard of reference of social needs, but only considered passively, as the external totality of economic goods. Consequently, whether superficial dissatisfaction respects all the economic rules or ends up infringing some of them in the name of what it believes to be a revolutionary program, the objects it covets will always bring it back to where it started, subjected to the same principle of an economy of social life and consequently to an *economy of its consciousness and practice*.

Even if a *constituted* situationist theory had never existed as a possible source of inspiration, the system of commodity consumption implicitly contains its *own situationism* in the form of a utopian fantasy of defectless and limitlessly consumable economic pleasures. Because the sphere of consumption (which amounts to all the social life nominally left to the initiative of individuals) is only one aspect of the economic process, is unable to free itself from its limits, and is absolutely dependent on its economic complement, its natural situationism tends to become *genuinely situationist*. But before this can take place the concept of pleasure inherited from the economic era must be fundamentally *transformed*.

Modern commodity production and consumption have eliminated many human capacities that people in previous eras possessed to at least some degree and that in some cases were necessary simply to ensure their survival. What is now actually taught, desired and practiced in the sphere of social consumption is simply the perfected *economy* of pleasure and of the capacity for living; what are being imposed everywhere, without encountering any real revolutionary resistance, are the petty culture, enjoyments, tastes and manias of *antihistorical humanity*. These are the same traits of general mediocrity that end up poisoning and rendering impossible every attempt at serious revolutionary struggle. Because it comes to him from *outside*, the habit of economic pleasure keeps the individual in his place, separate from the rest of the world; and this externality of economic pleasure, which excludes all fundamental initiative in decision and action, is precisely what is desired and consumed.

Some people still believe, for example, that the stupefying power of advertising lies in the fact that it makes people buy more useless goods. Actually, when advertising vaunts the merits of this or that particular commodity or of this or that pseudoneed that absolutely must be satisfied, it inevitably runs up against the contradiction of a competing product, of a consumers union, or of people's ordinary common sense. But beyond the commercial terrain, what advertising really imposes without meeting any resistance (by deflecting the spectator's attention from the fact that the language of advertising already implies and presents the happy spectacle of the *total approval of the existing system*) are all the socioeconomic presuppositions of which advertising is only one of the least serious consequences; along with the mode of subjection that is linked to those presuppositions, the poverty of the needs that result from them, and the absurd pretense that the latter can be satisfied within the rules of consumption. The fact that advertising has proved capable of turning itself into an object of spectacular debate, provoking people into declaring themselves for or against it, is an extreme example of its present stupefying power.

But if we judge it on the basis of its power of stupefaction, commercial advertising is far less dangerous than other, less obvious forms of publicity, whether in the political or the "cultural" sphere (including even the purely scientific sector). In reality, all colonized daily life contains all the stupefying power of the publicity of the present world: In a certain sense the Lip workers have recently produced much more formidable advertisements for the existing way of life than has Madison Avenue, if we take into account all their respective potential mystifying effects.

As *critique of alienated labor* and *project of its revolutionary abolition*, the situationists' theory meets, as a favorable objective terrain, the phenomenon of an increasing declassment of a sector of the population that was previously integrated and subdued but that is now more inclined to turn against the institution of work. A *structural crisis of the modern economy*, however, tends to throw individuals into revolutionary ideology well before they are in a position to grasp revolution as the only historical solution capable of practically dissolving the alienation of human activity. Those who treat work as the heaviest fetter on the new forms of struggle and consciousness remain

dominated by the work-world, which casts those it declasses into solutions of peripheral survival, hustles, petty criminality and dubious revolutionary fantasies.

Modern economic transformation modifies the conditions of alienated labor, changes the composition of social classes, destroys their traditionally established representations, reconstructs the environment from top to bottom, and alters all the rules of the global politico-economic game, but ultimately leaves the declassed individuals in the *same antihistorical destitution* as the others whom it still employs. The aspects of alienated labor which are now more or less confusedly resisted everywhere, and which are explicitly denounced as archaic by the new mentality that is developing into the *subjective corollary* of the modern forms of commodity production, are for the most part the same aspects that the work-world itself is attempting to phase out.

The fact that the remnants of know-how that were formerly linked to certain sectors of material and intellectual production, along with virtually all traces of *practical sense*, are tending to disappear from the social terrain is a direct consequence of the extreme fragmentation and absurdity of tasks in commodity production. (The *total* colonization of workers' gestures and decisions within their direct economic alienation is only one aspect of the colonization of all social life.) All capacities and desires for autonomous, *non-externally-dictated* activity are being utterly destroyed among the present population. *Powerless laziness*, which goes so far as to reject the pseudoactivities offered within production without being able to *reinvent* human activity on other bases, is emerging everywhere as the normal subjective attitude in the face of the new state of social reality.

A parallel conflict related to modern conditions of alienated labor arises from the model of *maximum economic enjoyment* embodied in the *cadre* social stratum, a model which is presented as the ultimate meaning of existence not only for the cadres but for all subservient social strata. Modern proletarians are molded into the average cadre mentality. Peasants, blue-collar workers, intellectuals, etc., are tending to lose the particular representations they once had, which are being replaced with the typical representations, tastes and desires of the cadres. This homogenization of subjective alienation manifests itself for example in the work-world by the fact that the demand for individual participation in economic decisions (or, outside of work, in political decisions), which was previously limited to the cadre socioeconomic level, is now becoming the natural demand of all types of workers, at the same time as it is becoming the official critique that the organization of labor makes of itself.

We can judge the extent of the problems that will present themselves to the revolutionary movement in the years to come by considering that the global cultivation of proletarian talents and the long apprenticeship of a new form of *all-encompassing practical sense* will have to start out from a near-total loss of all the old talents and from a current state of spirit that has neither the taste nor the preparation for any free practical enterprise whatsoever.

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As a *theory of individual autonomy*, the situationists' theory, once deprived of its *negative spirit*, becomes virtually indistinguishable from the bourgeois ethical vision of abstract individual freedom. But the real poverty that can delude itself in this way about its own lot is no longer so much the nominal freedom of labor in the face of capital as it is that *freedom of pure appearance* bred to the rules of consumable pleasure; that freedom of irresponsibility which continually resorts to external means of valorization and which gets "into" this or that while remaining separate from everything.

The nature of the freedom demanded by those who identify their own superficial dissatisfaction with the situationist project can, like all ideologies of refusal, be understood as a banal daydream of social advancement. The individual molded by present-day conditions, who has in fact lost all individual qualities, dreams of reaching a classless society *just as he is*. Scarcely concerning himself with accomplishing anything *despite* present conditions, he can hardly pursue revolution as the socio-historic means of *extending* such accomplishments; he merely dreams that his wretchedness will be less difficult to take than in the old world. He still hasn't felt the need to make himself a master of social life, and as a consequence of the narrowness of his actual needs he is still very poor at identifying the real obstacles to a revolution; he simply wishes that his present masters would stand aside in the face of a *proletarian miracle*. Thus, even when he sincerely believes himself capable of doing without authority, he is already setting himself up for the new power that will subdue him.

6

When a revolutionary theory is no longer in a position to effect its practical task of *transforming existing conditions of consciousness*, the poverty and lack of originality of those who carry on within its ruins rapidly attain caricatural proportions. The average revolutionary in such conditions tends to be subject to the *average alienations of his era*.

Even if, for example, he scorns the crude boss stereotype, the contemporary revolutionary has in no way rid himself of *hierarchical needs*. The motives that make him identify with the “revolutionary camp” suffice to demonstrate this. Unable to count for much in the existing social hierarchy, he tries to console himself by dreaming of a future society; not necessarily because he intrigues for a dominant role in it (usually nothing in him leads him to such an illusion), but because this assures him a share of the hierarchical status that membership in the revolutionary community provides within the *present* society. Among diverse other obligations that such a position brings with it, the contemporary revolutionary feels obliged to despise the old world and its most *conspicuous* servants, just as some poorly paid European workers still despise the immigrant laborer: because he reflects their own slavish image *too crudely*.

But through the vicissitudes of his theatrical subadventure the average revolutionary ends up demonstrating much more directly his profound need for a hierarchical environment: the solidity of his ideology, the degree of conviction he can give to it, depends directly on the *absolute ideological assurance* embodied in the personality of the leader. Conversely, if he himself happens to be in a leadership position, he feels an absolute need to be followed, since it is only the blind conviction of his followers that can support him in his role (objectively and, above all, subjectively). Whether he follows others or others follow him, the same need for illusion and show underlies his mentality.

Experimental egalitarian associations that develop in the coming struggles must no longer accept within themselves — and must combat externally — any *theoretical followerism* that does not simultaneously assign itself the humility and discretion that was characteristic of the *serious student* of classical education.

Revolutionary ideology is not merely a state of social false consciousness; it constantly manifests itself as a direct practical refusal of truth and of its concrete consequences. As an aspect of revolutionary ideology, the sole function of egalitarian voluntarism is to furnish an honorable decor for the flight from practical tasks.

It is notorious that anarcho-situationist egalitarianism has always refused to recognize the hierarchical aspects of its actual organizational functioning. This major practical evasion finally reduced the situationists' theory regarding revolutionary organization to a mere *counterideology* opposed to the dominant hierarchical organization, enabling the participants to share the illusion and the official lie of equality rather than to bear the shame of admitting their failure to achieve it. Yet the possibility of effectively anticipating all the new problems while there was still time to do so (notably for the old SI) hinged upon the admission of this failure and upon the recognition of the theoretico-practical conclusions resulting from it.

7

The *ideological need* which persists in individuals molded to the rules of commodity society's social relations, and which consistently regenerates itself even within their revolt, is totally contrary to the real theoretical sense and intuition on which will depend the course and ultimate outcome of all real theoretico-practical rebellion from now on.

Ideology, regardless of whatever element of scientific truth it may contain (Marxist-situationist theory, for example, still contains a substantial scientific foundation long after its inversion into ideology), is a veil placed between the individual and reality, and it reflects a system of interests that want to *preserve* this veil. Within the revolutionary counterideology opposed to existing conditions — which functions in a manner analogous to the *social spectacle* it depends on — the interests of the separate and the real need for separation that dominates it are dolled up in a hollow affirmation of the totally opposite state of affairs. Nevertheless, the ideological foundations of all modern revolutionary pseudothought, whether semiofficial or antiofficial, can be directly detected by its theoretical and practical *sterility*.

Ideological consciousness — which only rarely takes the form of gross ignorance — is essentially consciousness of *content*, i.e. the direct, positivistic assimilation of some *external* reality, whether that reality is a theoretical master or an individual or sociohistorical situation. Ideological consciousness functions by identifying with things, and is in fact based on the *need* for such identification. Dialectical consciousness, in contrast, derives its *anti-ideological*

force from its capacity to discern the *form*, to grasp the processes concealed behind the immediate perception of content. Awareness of form, of the *nonvisible* part of reality (an awareness that is always lacking in ideological consciousness) is the indispensable condition for determining the ultimate meaning found in the *relation* of form and content.

Behind the screen on which the drama of contents is projected (the spectacular character of modern society can be understood as the systematic social organization of this screen) the *work of negation* proceeds mainly at the level of forms before itself becoming a visible content. (Human activity can be seen as the higher form that has this privilege of creating its own contents, of transforming them, or of withdrawing from them, at will.)

While dialectical consciousness depends on the faculty of *distanciation* vis-à-vis content, ideological escapism reflects the *impairment* of that faculty. Unable to theoretically and practically master existing forms, ideological thought is instead totally subjected to them.

The negating faculty of distanciation can be understood as the faculty of turning in on oneself, of breaking one's own immediate relations with existing conditions; and ultimately, as the individual's capacity to take part in the internal conflicts that result from those relations.

The individual capable of distanciation is an individual reconciled with his true individuality, i.e. capable of looking at himself from the standpoint of his *development* and of the fundamental historical conflict upon which his development depends. It is through the faculty of distanciation that the individual preserves his capacity for freedom and is able to carry out and verify the practical development of that freedom in struggle.

The individual who lacks the faculty of distanciation is an individual continually clinging to externally determined values. Separated from himself, he ends up *interiorizing* the external social separation of the proletarian condition. He remains a stranger to himself just as he remains a stranger to the perspective of revolutionary theory even if circumstances have led him to superficially devote his existence to it.

In the same way, the historical movement by which the proletarian class progressively frees itself from the total externality of its original sociohistorical condition is nothing other than an act of *historical distanciation* upon which hinges, among other possibilities, the possibility of a *class consciousness*.

8

Because he remains above all an external being, the unoriginal individual produced by existing conditions feels the need, once present social conflicts touch him directly, for his gestures of revolt to be embodied in *mythological heroes*.

Christ is essential to the Christian mentality because he is the subjective incarnation connecting earth with heaven; he is the external subjective being who makes the Christian mentality possible because it is the earth, and the role that this mentality plays on it, that constitute for Christianity the actual inaccessible heaven. In the ordinary revolutionary mentality — within which the situationist mentality distinguishes itself only by a more marked and often more blind voluntarism — revolutionary heroes literally perform the function of Christ. The romantic vision of supertheorists and of a select few historical uprisings carries out, through the sacred person of the heroes, the union of terrestrial triviality with the heaven of universal history. The Bolsheviks were great pioneers in this type of cultifying: Lenin declared that to really be a Marxist one should always ask oneself, “What would Marx have thought and done in this situation?” The personal spectacular talents of the former SI (which at the same time constituted some of its real practical talents) attempted the highest stage of this classic heroic drama, decisively augmenting the concretization of myth: with the SI, a community of demigods found itself invested with the power of announcing the new conditions of paradise.

In opposition to the most elementary common sense, the contemporary revolutionary begins his task by no longer looking himself in the face. Instead, he successively identifies (in decreasing order of abstraction) with “the movement of history,” the epic of a *disembodied* “proletariat,” the romantic personalities of his intellectual masters, and finally and most directly, with the petty leaders that daily life puts in his path. Like all religious devotees, he arranges his own *biblical universe* wherein are gathered all the fantastic episodes that define the meaning of his rites. He learns, for example, that “the Paris Commune was the dictatorship of the proletariat” and that the blacks of

Watts embodied “the critique in acts of everyday life,” while being warned against “sociology” and “structuralism,” which he is taught to see as evil offshoots of “the commodity” and “the spectacle.”

Just as he ends up making a pitiful farce out of his whole concrete life (in this regard the average revolutionary is a worthy child of the present era), so his thought is nothing but a pale imitation of what others, because they have lived the necessary degree of adventure, have thought for him and before him. Depending on which sect he belongs to, he salivates at the most *miserable clichés*, which serve as collective bonds and representations among him and his companions; he prides himself on understanding the ideological in-references; he never jokes about anything except the scapegoats that his ideology designates because he knows that, like himself, his companions would be incapable of laughing at anything else. His self-expression within the group, and ultimately his only truly personal fulfillment, is reduced to demonstrating as often as possible that he is a servile student of the sect and the sectarianism that contain him.

9

Certain practical tasks induce revolutionaries to collaborate with each other; but more often than not they fail to achieve the slightest objective they have set for themselves because they have begun by carrying out this collaboration in an inappropriate manner. The qualitative weakness of the modern revolutionary movement continues to demonstrate that in the *manner of associating*, more than in anything else, everything remains to be learned. The depth of the objectives that revolutionaries are capable of setting for themselves in the course of their struggles, and their chances of achieving those objectives, depend dialectically on their competence in dealing with organizational questions.

Nevertheless, when things come to the point where association becomes a practical necessity, it is always possible to judge the worth of an individual — that is, the nature of the relations he maintains with himself, with others, and with reality as a whole — by noting that ideological escapism, which is not always immediately detectable on the level of ideas alone, will invariably leave the individual in a constant state of poverty and impotence.

Ideology, which must always be understood as not only a particular state of false consciousness but also as a set of material and subjective conditions that require such false consciousness, prevents *any* progress in the capacity for living or struggling. It is the worst school for such capacities, and is always promoted by people who basically do not want anything to change and who, above all, do not want to change *themselves*. The modern slave, whether he is a revolutionary or someone who is quite satisfied with present conditions, or something in between, is a supremely *antidialectical* being, the creature of an era where all progress, all taste for progress, and all understanding of progress have been repressed. Whenever urgent external circumstances disturb his complacency and force him to recognize his slavish position, he strives only to regain his illusion of freedom as soon as possible. Knowing nothing of time nor of "the organic progression of activity," he is the man of simulation and show, because that is the only mode of self-affirmation that can indefinitely ignore time.

10

Any revolutionary theoretical counterattack, whether it amounts to a new style of situationist struggle or to the emergence of some qualitatively different form, must render impossible the element of *superficial approval* that has prevailed over the last few years without encountering any effective opposition.

We have to begin by recognizing that the current vanguard of revolutionary theory has not only ceased keeping abreast of reality, it is dragging along a hundred leagues behind it. We might sum up the present crisis of revolutionary theory by saying that it found itself sooner than it expected having to *theoretically* overcome not only the society it is fighting but its own internal problems *arising out of the struggle itself*. At the center of these problems must be counted the rapid obsolescence of its previous ideas: their glaring inadequacy when it comes to trying to understand the stage now reached by the real revolutionary movement and to *acting in it* rather than merely enthusiastically announcing its existence.

The mass of new questions to which revolutionaries have so far been unable to find responses risks becoming time and terrain lost for the revolution itself. The contrast between the richness of this historical period and the scandalous silliness of its revolutionary critique has become glaring enough to rouse a new generation of revolutionaries to do something about it.

The coming struggles for practical theory will have to detect and combat not only the classic and generally known forms of alienation, but also the new forms of alienation stemming from the return of class struggles — notably, the forms of alienation that reconstitute themselves within the very heart of theoretical and practical struggles.

Knowledge, even very sophisticated knowledge, of the old revolutionary movement and the obstacles it ran up against proves quite inadequate when it comes to mastering the problems and tasks of the modern revolutionary movement. The revolution that is coming back into play can in scarcely any regard be equated with its past experiences. Taking the valid findings of classic Marxist-situationist theory as a point of departure, revolutionaries must henceforth learn to understand their revolution *as it happens*, by reinventing for it the theory that it requires *now*. It is no longer so much a matter of demonstrating that the old world should be and is going to be destroyed as of understanding the *development* of this destruction. The critical power of theory must first of all be brought to bear on the revolutionary movement itself; for in this movement, despite all its weaknesses and confusions, the construction of the new world has already begun. In its next stage, revolutionary theory will take on the character of a *theory of social war*. Losing the taste for skirmishes and games without consequences, it will know that in each fight the total stakes of this war are put in question.

Contrary to prevalent assumptions, the present revolutionary movement is far from having the victory of a situationist revolution within reach. A new class of rulers — whose members could be recruited, under the cover of the next revolutionary assault, from all the present spheres of social life (from among the most extremist revolutionaries as well as from the current ruling classes) — would certainly have better reasons for optimism than the amorphous minority of revolutionaries scattered around the world who intend to live the Marxist-situationist program *all the way*. There exists no *serious opposition* to the semirevolution which is being confusedly carried out before our eyes and which aims, whether peacefully or violently, at nothing more than reforming a few social irrationalities that have become *too glaring*. As for a genuinely situationist revolution, it is only on the *horizon* of present conflicts. For the moment the situationist program actually serves only as a *source of inspiration for a new status quo of the existing order* — just as, in another era, the communist program served to justify the kindred regimes of the Bolsheviks and the social democrats.

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